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THE OLYMPIAN RELIGION.

II.—OUTLINE OF ITS PARTICULARS (CONCLUDED).

BY THE RIGHT HONORABLE WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE.

PASSING on from the personal equipment of Homer's preternatural world, we have next to consider what were the distinctive qualities of its inhabitants as an order of deities.

The first answer must be that they were immensely varied ; so varied, indeed, that they cannot receive any adequate description in a slight outline such as this. Their singularly differentiated characters require to be set forth one by one ; and in their individual diversities we find one of the most important and fruitful provinces of the present inquiry. Still there are distinctive properties which the gods possess in common, and by which they are differenced from men.

The first of these qualities is that they are immortal. This is a property so essentially theirs that they are signified by it as a class. They, and they only, are the Immortals ; and to name the Immortals is to speak of the gods. It appears, indeed, that the gift could be imparted to man. This is suggested in Tithonos, the partner of the couch of Eos ;* and it seems in Homer to be an elementary part of the movement towards deification. If it be asked whether an Immortal could be deprived of the privilege, the answer seems to be, first, that, as a rule, penalty in no way interfered with immortality ; and, secondly, we learn from the language of Arès† that, though the gods could not die, the heart of their life might possibly be beaten out of them by a penal infliction.

The next universal characteristic of the gods is, that they are incorporated in human form. Wherever this is at all doubtful,

* Il., XI., 1, and Od., V., 1.

† Il., V., 885-887.

it is because the image presented to us is so slight that it hovers between a person and a metaphor. The human form is presupposed even in the case of the Nature-powers; as when a wood-nymph has offspring by a man, or a river-god by a woman. So thorough and well rooted is this conception in the Poet's mind that, in a passage intended to glorify Agamemnon, he sets off, as we have seen, the personal appearance of the supreme chief by reference to the corporal excellences of various divinities; he was like Zeus in eye and head; his waist like Arès (the nimble god); his chest like Poseidon.*

The third common characteristic of deity as such is a large excess of power beyond any possessed by mortals. This power is exhibited in various forms: in superiority to limitation; in the performance of acts not within the scope of natural law; and, in the cases of a very few higher deities, by direct and immediate action on the mind of man. It is to be observed, as a general rule, that there is always a peculiar amount of power possessed in the peculiar province to which each divinity is attached. So it is that even Aphroditè can master the mind and inclination of Helen,† and that Hephaistos gives life to the metallic figures he has made, apparently even in the case where they are set upon the shield of Achilles.‡ But it is only to his greater gods that Homer assigns important prerogatives outside a particular sphere of action. Of this divine power the maximum must be said to reside in Zeus: yet he can be beguiled and deceived in being sent to sleep (as it appears, but the process is not described) against or without his will.§

But, fourthly, there is also by the side of this power an universal characteristic of limitation. This is indefinitely large and stringent in its application outside the provinces of speciality. So severe is it in the case of Aphroditè that, when she ventures upon the battle-field to carry off her smitten son Aincias, she is attacked by Diomed and wounded in the hand, so that she lets her burden fall, and repairs to Olympos with the aid of the chariot of Arès.|| Thus in her case we are obliged to confine by conditions even the general proposition that the power of deities exceeds that of mortals. It holds, however, so generally that Achilles, whose might borders on the superhuman, is baffled and

* Il., II., 478, 479. † Il., III., 383, seqq. ‡ Il., XVIII., 535-540; 546-549. Od., VII., 91-94. § Il., XIV., 252, 262, 280, 359. || Il., V., 318, 330-339, 363-367.

foiled by the Nature-power Scamandros when acting in his own right as a river-flood.*

At the other end of the scale, Zeus himself is not free from limitation in other cases besides the peculiar case of preternatural stratagem. He did not know, because he did not see, what Poseidon was doing on the battle-field in Troas; and he did not see, because he was looking in another direction, over the line of the Balkan mountains.† Again, after he woke, he accepted with a smile the assurance of Herè, confirmed by an oath, that she had not incited Poseidon against the Trojans. But he remained‡ unaware of the device by which she had contrived that the activity of Poseidon should be prolonged, through an exhortation which Hupnos delivered to him, apparently as her messenger.§ Aphroditè, Arès, Helios, and others make their complaints to him, and thereby show that he had not previous cognizance of the facts. I need not prolong the list of his limitations in this place. But it may be observed that they are limitations in the sphere of mind, not in that of external nature. The different deities of Homer stand differently related to locomotion; but there are no stages in the movements of Zeus as he passes from point to point. I have dwelt upon the case of Zeus, because, as he is at the summit, and as the Olympian system exhibits to us divinity in many conditions of inferiority to his, it will be readily understood that, as we move through the list of deities on a descending scale, limitation is progressively increased.

This proposition, however, has one most conspicuous exception. Although the mere power of Zeus is greater than that of Athenè, and is sometimes used in order even to coerce her, she, apart from these interferences, is exempt from all limiting conditions, whether material or mental. She is never ignorant, never deceived, never baffled. The case of Apollo closely, but less conspicuously, approximates to hers.

Fifthly, next to limitation, we must consider the case of actual wants. It cannot be said that the Olympian gods are wholly free from what we consider as corporal wants, for example, from what Aischulos calls the *γάρστος ἀνάγκη*. What can be truly said is that a large provision is made for the enjoyment which is

* II., XXI., 263-274.

† II., XIII., 1-7.

‡ II., XV., 42-47.

§ II., XIV., 356.

associated with the supply of wants, by the banquets which, though not uniformly in one place, are understood to be habitual with the gods. But, behind this curtain of luxury, something also of necessity remains. Not only Aphroditè and Arès, but Aidoneus, and even Herè, had at different junctures been wounded by the hand of man; and, though it is not recorded of the goddesses, the two gods* had to be cured of their wounds by Paieon. Again, as to food. Neither Athenè nor Apollo ever adverts to sacrifices as giving by their savor a physical satisfaction. But Zeus twice very unequivocally describes this reek of the victims, together with the libation, as the share or privilege of the gods;† the same words being put into his mouth on both occasions. Actual eating and drinking are, as we have seen, ascribed individually to deities less exalted. Calupso provides nectar and ambrosia for Hermes,‡ which he drank and ate to the satisfaction of his soul; and when Thetis visits Hephaistos, his bride and housewife Charis proposes to furnish *xeinia* forthwith, evidently meaning food. To this there is no parallel in the case of the higher gods. And, when Poseidon is on the field of battle before Troy, it is laid down that it is not allowed (*οὐ δέμεις ἐστὶ*) to them to take part in the battles of men,§ although Arès, a deity of lower rank, had previously done it to his cost.

Zeus is the most human in his affections of all the gods, and sometimes regards with a strong natural compassion the sorrows of men, which at other times he is heartily delighted to behold;|| but it cannot be said that other deities are as much given to emotion. The sympathies of Herè with particular persons, and especially with the Greeks at large, seem to dwell entirely in the region of the intellect, and in their operation are purely national and political. All the credit that can be given to the Olympian order, in the region of the affections, is that they are not devoid of sympathy with their own offspring. Aphroditè exerts herself for the relief of Aincias.¶ Arès is violently excited to revenge on learning the death of his son Ascalaphos; ** and Poseidon repeatedly protects or rescues not his sons only but more remote descendants.†† All this, however, indicates much more of animal or instinctive, and perhaps of racial, than of

* Il., V., 401, 899. † Il., IV., 43; XXIV., 70. ‡ Od., V., 92. § Il., XIV., 386. || Il., VIII., 51, 52. ¶ Il., V., 311, seqq. ** Il., XV., 113. †† *e. g.*, Il., XI., 750-752.

moral sentiment. For Poseidon betrays the quality of his paternal affection by bitterly persecuting Odysseus for measures of pure self-defence taken against the savage Poluphemos; the one monster of the Poems, whose passions and vices are unredeemed by a single virtue. Much higher in rank stand the affection and pain of Zeus on the extinction of his noble son Sarpedon.*

It would be improper to pass without particular notice the libertinism of the gods. They exhibit a prevailing laxity in sexual relations. On this topic it is to be observed, in the first place, that there is no such taint in the Homeric pictures of Athenè or (as I think) of Apollo; a fact which is only here noticed as a mark of Homer's profound reverence for those two divinities, without examining into its cause. Artemis also is wholly untainted; and, in the Hellenic image, is seemingly intended to be the representation of maiden and of matronly chastity. Passing from the exceptions to what is more nearly the rule, I deal here with the conspicuous case of Zeus in the fourteenth "*Iliad*."† He enumerates in series the human connections which produced respectively Peirithoos, Perseus, and Minos with his brother Rhadamanthos, Heracles, and Dionusos: the last of these undoubtedly divine, though from a human parent. He then passes to Demeter and Leto. And all these amatory affairs are paraded by the offender himself, at the meeting with Herè; a poetical impropriety which may be compared with the protracted speeches in the battle-field, or with the relation by Achilles to Thetis of a lengthened story in a great part of which she herself had borne a principal part. The impropriety is perhaps to be explained on similar grounds in all the cases: it seems to be a vehicle for imparting to the Poet's hearers what he desires that they should know with a view to the purposes, ethnographical or historical, which he had in his mind. We are, I think, to consider Zeus as describing in this passage, to an extent which in some degree we can trace, the formation of the Achaian nationality and religion. The connection with Danaè, for example, perhaps is meant to indicate the introduction of the Phœnician element into the Greek peninsula; that with Demeter, the reconciliation, so to call it, of the newer ideas with the old Nature-worship of the country; and that with Leto, the very special features which Apollo contributes to the Olympian scheme.

* II., XVI., 459.

† 315-328.

This view, I think, is supported by the case of Poseidon. There are assigned to him, in the two Poems, a number of important filiations in the Peloponnesos and in Scheriè, which obviously bear an ethnographical character; helping to attach, for example, the Phaiakes to the Phœnician connection, and Nestor to the same stock. It is possible that the Poet may have been governed by some similar consideration in assigning to Hermes and Arès respectively the paternity of some personages mentioned in the "Iliad." But, at the least, all these ascriptions have a moral aspect. Take them as we will, they clearly imply that there was nothing in Homer's conception of these several divinities to interpose a moral bar in the way of his imputing to them acts which in the case of men would carry with them more or less of stigma. I say more or less, for while in the "Iliad" spurious offspring is broadly distinguished from legitimate, the distinction does not always carry with it social consequences. In certain cases the innocent bearer of the stigma is admitted to equality in rearing.

Chastity may be called the outermost barrier of morality, and is the first, accordingly, to give way. The indulgence of sexual passion is general with the gods, unless there be a single exception in Apollo—a question requiring a separate discussion. It subsists among the goddesses also; and though not universally, yet most grossly of all in Aphroditè, who is simply its impersonation, and represents no other power whatever. Besides Aphroditè, we may notice the cases of Demeter and of Eos.*

Let us turn to a more general view of the quality of Olympian god-head.

Subject to certain reservations, which will be more properly considered in connection with the delineations of the Homeric deities individually, it must be confessed that their characters are self-centred and are based upon Hedonism, or the Epicurean system in its fullest development. They appear not to incur any responsibility; not to be subject to the moral law, which does not exist for them, because they have no superior, by whom its sanctions could be applied. They are exempted from its sway by the possession of exceptional power. The case of these imposing conceptions shows as if superiority in power, which ought always to be accompanied by a higher acknowledgement of duty, operated

* *Od.*, V., 121-124; *XV.*, 250-251.

in a manner directly the reverse, and aggravated the derangement not only of human nature, but of every nature modelled, like that of the Olympian gods, on corresponding lines. True, we must distinguish between the pictures of deities still non-Hellenic, and therefore not entitled, in the Poet's eyes, to religious homage, and the representation of deities such as Herè, Poseidon, or Hermes. The first conception, which deals with non-Hellenic deity, amounts in certain respects almost to caricature. The second exhibits to us the genuine tendencies of a highly intellectual people in the process of moulding their religion; and they go far to prove that religion itself was on the road to become not a regenerating power, but rather, in important particulars, an instrument for aggravating the moral disorders of the world.

We have thus far treated of the qualities and powers of the Homeric gods in their several personalities. Let us now turn to consider more at large the general characteristics of the combination into which they were formed, and which I have named the Olympian religion.

When we come to contemplate this Olympian scheme as it is in itself, we cannot fail to be struck by the marked, systematic, and pervading character of its general characteristics, in which it so greatly differs from formations such as those of the Babylonian, Assyrian, and Egyptian religions. Let us enumerate some of these notes.

In the first place, the Olympian scheme of Homer is a highly scientific formation. Its numerous parts or ranks are placed in defined, and for the most part well-defined, relations to each other, and, notwithstanding their large range and diversified aspects, all are made to work together for a common end.

Without attempting here to define the degree in which the great undertaking of Homer partook of the elements of moral reform, thus much at least appears to be certain, and, if certain, peculiar. He first, and he only, in the history of ancient religions, brought order out of chaos, and unity out of diversities which might well have seemed irreconcilable. What were the materials with which he had to work? There was, first, the comparative purity which we seem justified in ascribing to the Achaian or Hellenic ideas. There was the Pelasgian cult of Nature-powers, a system little capable of lifting itself, or of being lifted, above the surface of the earth. Lastly, we have the more devel-

oped forms of religion which had come over sea in Phœnician company, and which evidently drew after them a flood of moral corruptions. These offered to the Poet's eye an assemblage of materials anything rather than tractable. But, almost in despite of themselves, they were wrought into a poetical and literary unity. The task which he undertook and performed was one wholly without parallel in any other country. But it was essential to his nation-making work that he should constitute an Olympian unity, and without it the historic Hellas never could have existed.

In the next place, the scheme is highly national and political. Political, inasmuch as the divinities are members of an organization methodically ordered for a common purpose, so that in speaking of an Olympian hierarchy we speak, in the main, of an Olympian State. And it is national in more than one respect. In the first place, because its leading powers are charged with a strongly Achaian coloring. In the Trojan war the really great and powerful deities are all on the Achaian side, subject only to this qualification—that for a temporary purpose Zeus holds them back, and in so doing has in all cases Apollo for his obedient minister. The Olympian scheme, as Homer sets it forth, is variously national. Poseidon is attached to his Hellenized descendants; Herè is absolutely unremitting in her vigilance for the army at large, as well as for its leaders. It is the more special office of Athenè to keep watch and ward over the greatest of the national heroes personally; and Apollo, in the “*Odyssey*,” presides over the crowning exploit of Odysseus. But it is also national in a still higher sense. The subject of the *Iliad* is not the war of Troy, but the wrath of Achilles exhibited during and in connection with the war of Troy. The plot results from an Olympian consultation, and is adjusted principally with a view to the glorification of Achilles; and it is in the figure of Achilles that we have the Poet's crowning exhibition of Hellenism. But though care and effort are concentrated upon this point, they are also distributed over the whole field of the nation. To every considerable chief there are awarded, in one part or another of the “*Iliad*,” space and opportunity enough for a rich harvest of exploit and of fame; and even secondary personages, such as Meriones and Automedon, are not left wholly without their share of martial honor.

The Christian religion stands in contrast with the paganism which

it destroyed and replaced in this, among other particulars, that its main business has been the government of individuals and not that of states, although the government of states is doubtless a portion of its work, and ought to be directed in all things by its principles.

The Olympian system, on the other hand, as it stands in Homer, is more concerned with public affairs than with private character. Of private rights, indeed, it may have taken some cognizance, and when Odysseus recites the means of repairing his wasted fortunes, and among them contemplates the acquisition of much booty,* it is probable, though there is nothing distinctly specified, that this booty is to be prize of war. But the religion is very slightly charged with the formation of private character, beyond this, that the good man is devout and regular in the worship of the gods, like Eumaios in the “Odyssey”;† and that misconduct cannot be covered by the mere tribute of sacrifice.‡ But the inner schooling of the individual, the expression of religion in devout affection, or in the control of appetite, or as a renewing process which is to cover the whole field of human nature, is unknown to this Olympian scheme; and piety hardly counts, though justice may, in the prospect or retrospect of life. It is predicted that Odysseus shall live and die in a happy old age, with his people prospering around him;§ but there is in this remarkable prophecy no reference to his relations with the gods. We hear of them in certain forms of duty; they are the guardians of nature’s fundamental laws; and they are sought out in great emergencies; but beyond this they have no concern with human life in the private sphere. Indeed, in some cases, they are charged with its offences and miscarriages. On the other hand, they care for the general tranquillity, and resent the infraction of public right.

Whatever be the relaxations in the moral code of the divinities,—and they are undeniable,—their general government of the world not only “makes for righteousness” on the whole, but is directly and systematically addressed to the great end of rendering it triumphant. And this is claimed by Zeus in the Olympian Assembly.|| The terms which he employs are remarkable: “Men complain of us the gods, and say that we are the source from whence ills (κάκα) proceed, but they likewise themselves suffer woes outside the course of destiny (ὕπερμωρον), through their

* Od., XXIII., 357. † Od., XIV., 435, 446. ‡ Il., I., 93, seqq. § Od., XI., 136; XXIII., 284. || Od., I., 32-34.

own perverse offending." This offending is indicated by the term *ἄρασθαι*, used by Homer to designate the kind of wrongdoing which is the result, not of temptation working upon us through passion or infirmity (these are described as *ἄραι*), but which is spontaneous, wilful, and unrestrained by regard to God or man. The word comes near to the full idea of sin; and is deeper and more expressive, in regard to the moral law, than any phrase, so far as I know, to be found in the literature of historic Greece. Then Zeus goes on to illustrate by example what he has said: "for Aigisthos has committed his great crimes in spite of the express warning which we sent him from the gods through Hermes; but these outrages of his shall be punished by the hand of Orestes, when he comes to his full age."

And this claim of Zeus is a fair one. For nothing can be clearer than that each of the two Poems is constructed and adjusted with a view, in the main, to the triumph of right and the punishment of wrong. Troy is to fall, notwithstanding the strong personal attachment which Zeus felt for it on account of the liberal sacrificial system by which his altar profited; and the design of this retribution is the design which Zeus has either devised or at least accepted. On the other hand, not only do the troubles of Odysseus end in his restoration, but his return is gilded with the prophecy of a prosperous old age.*

Beyond this, there is very little to be said in abatement of the general proposition that, whatever be their collective conduct, the common speech of the gods is below the human level in point of morality. A debate in Olympos is far inferior in tone to a debate in the Achaian Assembly. The superlative quality of nobleness is to be found in the speeches and conduct of heroes. The speech of Sarpedon to Glaukos,† the rebuke of Odysseus to Eurualos in Scheriè,‡ can hardly be surpassed. We look in vain for such discourses among the gods. The Olympian council of the last Book meets to perform an act of humanity in the conservation and redemption of the body of Hector. The thing done is right; but the whole process is made to turn on procuring the acceptance of the gifts of Priam by Achilles; undoubtedly a good working method, but one not uplifted by any sentiment more lofty than the expression by Zeus of the love which the gods entertained for Hector by reason of his constant offerings.

* Od., XI, 134-137; XXIII., 281-284. † II., XII., 310. ‡ Od., VIII., 166.

Nor is it easy to conceive a worse transaction than that of the fourth Book where it is arranged between Zeus, Herè, and Athenè that Pandaros shall be incited to break the truce so solemnly made for the settlement of the whole quarrel by single combat. On the suggestion of Herè, this mission is enjoined by Zeus upon Athenè; but it was a command that Athenè herself was eager to receive.* She at once rushed away to fulfil it, assuming a human personality for the purpose.† Without doubt it was necessary for the plot as decreed by Zeus on the prayer of Thetis that the truce should be broken. I think it is also true that Zeus does not act upon the minds of men in specific instances without some intermediate agency or manifestation, as Athenè acts upon the minds of the Suitors. Still it is singular and highly significant that Homer should thus employ the direct agency of the highest among his deities to secure the perpetration of what is among the very grossest of all moral offences, to wit, the deliberate breach of a most solemn engagement.

With this case before us, we cannot be surprised that Athenè, in the "Odyssey," should boast to Odysseus of her skill in guile,‡ and pay him the compliment of saying that he is her counterpart on earth. Yet more striking, from some points of view, is the case of Autolukos in the "Odyssey," who was instructed in the arts of fraud by Hermes himself;§ an incident appertaining in great measure to the peculiar attributes of that divinity.

The third and the most remarkable among the characteristics of the Olympian religion is that which has been more commonly than happily termed anthropomorphism. The phrase is misleading, because it signifies no more than that the Homeric divinities are associated with the human form. But there is a far wider and deeper incorporation than this of the human with the divine element, which I venture to express by a term which, at any rate, is capable of conveying it in its full breadth—the term theanthropy. It is not the form only, but the mind, the character, the appetites, the modes of thought and speech, and both of acting and of suffering, which, subject to a reservation that is presently to be made, are pervadingly and intensely human. Nor is this humanism in the divinities confined to the individual: it marks the polity as a whole, not less than the single member of it; and the government of the world by the Olympian

* Il., IV., 64-73. † Ibid., 36-38. ‡ Od., XIII., 295-301. § Od., XIX., 396.

gods, with circumstantial differences, is essentially modelled upon the basis of human action. This theanthropic spirit is, more than any other particular, the *natura naturans* of the Olympian scheme. But besides the exhibition of theanthropic conditions in affirmative forms, we observe the determined theanthropism of the Poet in a multitude of arrangements, by which he throws into the background those forms of religion which are not in harmony with the spirit of the Olympian scheme, or contrives some compromise with them under which they are tolerated, but not allowed to retain an inconvenient form. It is not possible to go through, in this place, the mass of details from which alone these assertions can be made good. But by way of sample I will specify a very few of them.

The solar attributes of Apollo, derived from a nature-cult, are permitted to survive in decorative epithets, but so as nowhere to disguise his Olympian character or embarrass his action. Helios, the solar deity, possibly the working chief of Troic religion, is thrust almost, though not altogether, out of view in the "Iliad"; probably because he could not be exhibited on the same stage as the Olympian Apollo without confusion. But in the Outer geography of the "Odyssey" his full figure is shown, because on foreign ground he is not in competition with the Achaian and Olympian conception. The exquisitely beautiful Artemis of the "Odyssey" has a far inferior reflection in the "Iliad," evidently because she was associated in Troas with the system of earth-worship. Again, considering what we know of the widely-diffused practice of serpent-worship, we might be surprised at not finding it in the Poems. Animal-worship, however, in any form was obviously in deadly hostility to theanthropy. Therefore the serpent is carefully shut out from receiving homage; yet subject to this accommodation, that it keeps its place as a vehicle of presage, and that a position of great dignity is allowed to it, not, however, as a power, but as an emblem, on the breastplate and belt of Agamemnon.*

In all these characteristic points, the Olympian scheme is widely different from every other religion of the ancient heathen world. Nor is the record of distinctions yet exhausted. It has, as compared with any other among those religions, less in its aggregate of an abstract or didactic, and more of a

* II., XI., 26, 33.

literary, as well as a patriotic, character. I do not say that it represents more accurately the beliefs of the people among whom it sprang into existence than may be the case with some of the rest. Possibly, nay probably, it offers a less faithful picture. We do not here find ourselves in contact with a philosopher like Confucius or Zoroaster, or a reformer like Buddha. The motley group of gods to whom we are introduced do not, like the systems of Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt, convey to us an undigested and almost chaotic record of popular worships. Those are disjointed stones; these are an elaborate and magnificent structure. Those are raw material in its earliest stage; these are coördinated, and in coördination modified, by the hand of a master. A great and commanding genius takes in hand a reconciling work. What sovereigns have during these later centuries sometimes attempted in combining by compromise the varying beliefs of their people, was in this case endeavored, and in great measure achieved, by a Poet. It is no wonder if, in such a case, we can trace the mark of the chisel upon the marble, and even find ourselves admitted to a shadowy view of the great artificer in his workshop.

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